

Gypsy has managed to move on from her terrible experiences

'MY DAD MURDERED MY FAMILY, BUT I SURVIVED...'

Gypsy Wesson's evil dad murdered nine members of her family. Here she tells *Cosmo* how she escaped his reign of terror

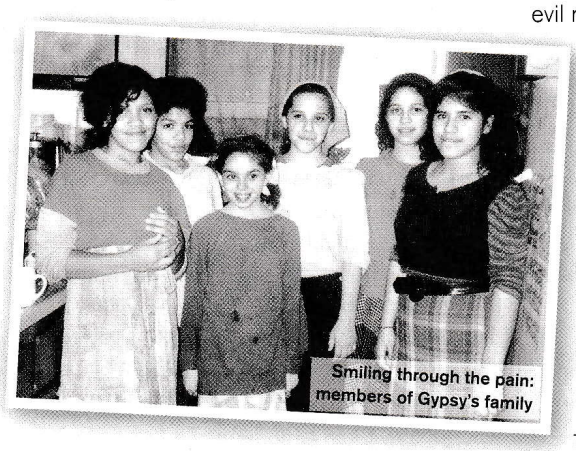
"I looked up at my sister Lise, and she stared back, her dark eyes filled with fear. Behind us, our cousin loaded our father's rifle with 12 bullets – one for each adult and child. Then we waited to die.

"I was born in 1983, the ninth child of Elizabeth and Marcus Wesson. Dad ruled us with a violent temper. He cut us off from the world, banning us from going to school or speaking to strangers. In fact, we were barely allowed to speak at all, and were frequently beaten.

"Mum was a victim too. Dad had been in a relationship with her mother and started grooming Mum when she was just eight. He was 28 and she was 15 – and five months pregnant – when they married. Over the next 12 years, Mum gave birth to seven boys and four girls. We also took in four female cousins when my aunt was struggling to cope.

"I'd watch as the older girls were called into Dad's bedroom. When I was eight it was my turn. 'This is to prepare you for your husband,' he told me, touching me over my clothes. After a year, he started fondling me under my clothing; by the time I was 12 he was forcing me to perform oral sex. Unbelievably, I just accepted that this was a 'chore' we had to endure, but even then I was more questioning than my sisters – I knew there had to be a better life than this.

"The older girls all wore gold rings and I learnt that my father had 'married' them, making them swear their loyalty on the Bible, then calling them his wives. The gold bands signified that he'd started having sex with them. As each girl approached 18, they were told it was their duty to start having his children. Mum was so brainwashed that she didn't question it when my sisters said they'd been artificially inseminated.



Smiling through the pain: members of Gypsy's family

"My 17-year-old sister Kiani was the first to fall pregnant in 1995, and, over the next eight years, six other children were born to my sisters and cousins. When distant relatives started to ask questions, Dad simply moved us away until no one knew where we lived."

Suicide plan

"Dad told us he was a messenger from God, and said the government was full of evil men who wouldn't understand how we lived and would try to break up our family. 'We can never let that happen,' he repeated. If the authorities ever tried to break us up, we were told to 'send the children to the Lord' – by shooting them through the right eye.

"I never really believed Dad's suicide plan would happen – until one day in 1999. He was away so it was my cousin – who'd been left in charge – who loaded the gun. I was 15 and we were living on an old boat at the time, 12 of us crammed below deck.

She noticed a van passing by several times, and believed it was social services. 'Write your suicide notes,' she instructed us, as she loaded the rifle. Fortunately, at the last minute one of my sisters managed to get hold of Dad, and the plan was aborted. But he was thrilled that we'd been so willing to go through with it.

"Two years later we moved to California. By now my brothers had left home. Three of my cousins had also run away, but they'd >

had to leave their children behind, and were so scared of what Dad might do to the babies that none of them raised the alarm. And so the nightmare continued.

"When I was 19, Dad made me 'marry' him. A few days later, he called me into his room and pushed his hands between my thighs. I squeezed my legs shut, and began to cry. Dad seemed surprised – it was as though no one had ever rejected him. 'Get out!' he yelled.

"The next day he told me I had to quit my job as a hotel cleaner, which I'd been allowed to take because we were so short of money, and demanded that he and I go alone to the boat where we used to live. 'Pack a bag,' he ordered. 'I'll wait for you in the car.'

"In that moment I made a split-second decision. Heart pounding, I ran to the laundry room and hid between the washing machine and the dryer. I waited for hours until I was sure he'd stopped looking for me.

One of my brothers' girlfriends, Janet, lived locally, so I ran there. She offered to let me stay, and swore not to tell anyone."

Learning to live

"I was 20 years old but as naïve as a child. I'd left home with just the clothes on my back, but I was determined to build a new life. Going to the police wasn't an option – I didn't want to put my family in danger.

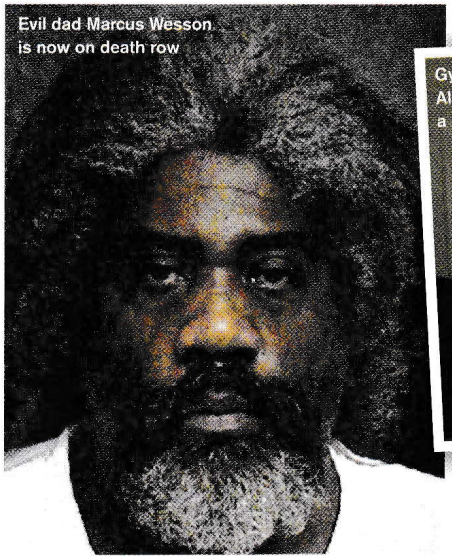
"I tried my best to fit in, but felt like an alien when people at work talked about boyfriends or nights out. I realised just how abnormal my upbringing had been.

"Three months after I'd first run away, Dad turned up outside work. 'Don't you want to see the children again?' he asked. Desperate to speak to them, I found myself climbing into the car. But as we pulled up outside the house, he started ranting and I realised then he had no intention of letting me leave. I had to think fast.

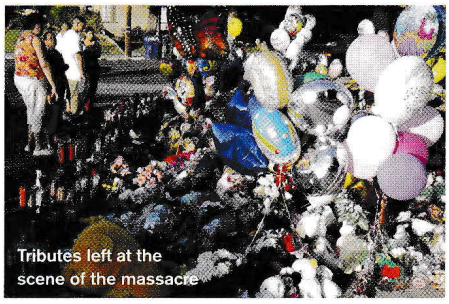
"'I want to come home,' I said. 'But first I need to fetch my bag from work.' He stared at me for a moment, then turned around and drove me back to the hotel. I'm still not sure why – perhaps he just wanted to believe that he still controlled me.

"I ran through the hotel and hid. I knew Dad wouldn't follow in case he attracted attention. I longed to see my family but knew I could never go back home again.

"It was time to live for myself. I studied for my school diploma, then enrolled on a catering course and learnt to drive. I even started dating Janet's brother Michael*. I'd never been allowed to speak to boys, so at first I was painfully shy. But he was so sweet and patient, and I grew to trust him."



Evil dad Marcus Wesson is now on death row



Tributes left at the scene of the massacre

'I FELT A COLD DREAD. "OH, GOD," I THOUGHT, "HE'S FINALLY DONE IT"'

Tragedy

"On 12 March 2004, I'd spent the day with friends. On the way home we drove past my old house, and I noticed several police cars parked outside. As soon as I got home I switched on the TV, and Dad's face filled the screen. Cold dread flooded through me. 'Oh, god,' I thought, 'he's finally done it.'

"My friends drove me back to the house, where I saw Mum sitting outside. 'Where's Lise?' I screamed, desperate to see the sister I'd been closest to. 'She's dead,' Mum replied flatly. 'He's killed them all.'

"Earlier in the day, I learnt, two of my cousins had arrived at the house, wanting custody of their children. When Dad refused, the police had been called, and it must have seemed like all of his prophecies were coming true.

"Mum had been out, returning in time to watch the stand-off as it spiralled out of control. By the time police got inside, all seven of the children had been shot dead with a single bullet in the eye. Last to die were my sisters Lise, 19, and Sebhrenah, 26. My sister Kiani and cousin Rosie had only survived because they'd been outside negotiating with the police.

"The massacre over, my father simply walked out of the front door, his T-shirt covered in blood, and was arrested. He didn't even have the guts to die alongside his family. He was charged with nine counts of murder, and 14 counts of sexual abuse."



Gypsy with her friend Alysia Sofios, who's written a book about the tragedy

Moving on

"At Dad's trial, seeing him again – his cold, dark eyes and greying dreadlocks – my whole body started to shake. Gunpowder residue had been found on Sebhrenah's hands and he claimed she'd been acting on her own; that he was just another innocent victim. But I knew the truth. I told the court about his violence, his sexual abuse and the suicide training he'd put us through.

"I was relieved when the jury found him guilty. He was sentenced to death, and is currently in San Quentin Prison, California, waiting for his execution date. For me, he's getting the easy way out, while the rest of us have to live with our grief.

"Yet, despite everything, I feel blessed. I'm 26 now, and work as a hotel catering coordinator; I'm also studying for a degree in human resources. Michael and I had a daughter and, although unplanned, her birth marked a new beginning – the first grandchild who hadn't been fathered by my dad. Michael and I split after three and a half years, but we're still good friends.

"I've grown closer to Mum, Kiani and Rosie since the trial. I used to blame them for staying loyal to Dad for as long as they did – but now I realise that they were victims too. I'll never stop grieving for the family I lost, but the best way to honour their memory is to move on with my life and be happy."

BY JACQUI PATERSON. PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES. *WHERE HOPE BEGINS* BY ALYSIA SOFIOS (£15.97, POCKET BOOKS) TELLS THE STORY OF THE WESSON FAMILY MASSACRE. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED